



Two things we've needed this week, harmony and silence, I think. I know you've seen it because we are all witnesses these days. We are all witnesses to so much, maybe to too much that happens in the world. And this one was challenging, to see a young man trying to protest and help a friend, and then pinned to the ground and murdered in Minneapolis. We watched and we wept, and we have raised our anger. We have asked, "What is going on?" And we have wondered what it means to live in this country. And we have listened to his own words honoring a patient and honoring American freedom in a video they made of him reading over a patient of his who had died who served in the military when he said, "Today we remember that freedom is not free, that we have to work at it, nurture it, protect it and even sacrifice for it."

The execution, and I call it execution, of Alex Pretti, we saw on the news and on our phones, the complete lack of responsibility taken by anyone in our federal government. The grief we have for our nation and for our his family. The rage we feel. What do we do with it all?

I know that I am tempted to retreat from all this. In a sense, here in Dallas, we all had a retreat this week as the ice closed us in our homes. But we couldn't stop looking, could we? And for me, more retreat really isn't in the cards. I just returned from our annual pilgrimage to the Unitarian community in Northeast India, where nine pilgrims met many Unitarians, worshiped and spent time with precious children at our project, The Children's Village, so far from here. And while I was halfway around the world, people asked me questions there like, "Is there widespread fighting in the streets in your city?" They're watching the news. "Is your president out of his mind," they asked us. "Does your president just wake up every day and do whatever comes to mind? Is he trying to destroy the world," they asked.

These are questions from people whose own president destroyed a monumental Islamic site only to erect a Disney-like new Hindu site to stoke Islamic-Hindu divisions, is leading the legacy of

misinformation and a failure to address critical issues in a very complicated country, and is leading what they call a religious nationalist movement. And they're asking us these questions.

Honestly, looking back on the US from India, I just see a country in decline. More than that, it looks like a country that is callous to its own people's needs. And that is where we begin today because no one is immune from what is happening and we all have the same questions. What do we do with it all? How do we respond? And on a Sunday that's supposed to be focused on generosity, I am not raising money here. I am asking you what generous spirit you can muster when the chips are down.

Here's our theological framework for today. It is how our faith understands our presence in the world, here it is. It says that this world is the locus of the holy that struggle in salvation, are present here and now, and that all life is sacred and interconnected. And that generosity, gratitude and hope are ways we honor these truths and the blessings of our lives. Let me repeat that because it's important. This is our faith. This is our theology. We understand that this world is the locus of the holy that struggle in salvation, are present here and now, and that all life is sacred and interconnected. And that generosity, gratitude and hope are ways we honor these truths and the blessings of our lives.

This week, the columnist David Brooks in his goodbye letter in The New York Times said something similar. He said, "Every healthy society rests on the shared conception of the sacred. Sacred heroes, sacred texts, sacred ideals. And when that goes away, anxiety, atomization and a slow decent toward barbarism are the natural results." He's almost describing our faith through his critique of where we have landed as a country. And his proposition that only something focused on a shared sense of the sacred and our moral responsibility to one another can save us. He says, like a true Unitarian that he really isn't that a saving grace is our recognizing our humanity, he calls it humanism.

"Humanism comes in many flavors," he writes. "It is anything that upholds the dignity of each person." Is he watching our videos? I think, maybe. "Lincoln re-binding the nation in a second inaugural address, Martin Luther King Jr. Writing from the Birmingham jail, Tracy Chapman, the Black, gay folk rocker and Luke Combs, the white, straight country singer singing her song of desperation, Fast Car, at the Grammy's last year, all signs of humanism." He says, "It is any endeavor that deepens our understanding of the human heart, any effort to realize eternal spiritual values in our time and circumstances, any gesture that makes other people feel seen and heard and respected. That is the saving grace," he says. And our faith says something similar. It calls on us to cultivate a spirit of gratitude and hope in the face of even the greatest challenges that we face. It calls on a deep sense of generosity, of seeing each other, and even seeing those we dislike and disgust us as part of a human family.

I want to confess to you today that it's getting harder and harder for me to do this while we see the forces of evil working against everything we believe. By our Unitarian Association bylaws which we revised recently it says, "Our generosity connects us to one another in relationships of interdependence and mutuality." And yet, our world seems hellbent on a challenge to this very notion every day we wake up. Sometimes it feels like we're living in a battleground between the forces of dehumanization on one side, rabid partisanship, social media bigotry. And on the other, the tired, worn down forces of the humanization of each other.

Every time someone is killed in the streets, or imprisoned, or deported or abducted by federal officials because of the color or their accent, whether they are American citizens or not, we are challenged to uphold humanism and connect with generosity to one another in relationships of interdependence and mutuality. Every time we open the news and see boasting about peacemaking while people die from bombs dropped by our Department of War, or invasions or neglect, we are challenged. Every time we encounter another version of unleashed lawlessness, a disregard for the rule of law, the eradication of truth and facts that matter, we feel like no one is safe. I don't know about you, but I shrink in my capacity for generosity to one another in relationships of interdependence and mutuality.

Our generous spirits just chip away, don't they? As we shrink from danger, and above all, these things that are happening in our country that are shrinking our capacity for generosity, and interconnectedness and mutuality I believe are a deliberate basic training in the suspicion and distrust of one another that we are all enrolled in. That means that this suspicion and training in hatred is the fertile soil for continued rises of division and the conquering of politics through divide-and-conquer tactics. Add on that the rising cost of living, the stress and strain in industry and the workplace by punitive foreign economic policy and the displacement of standards of healthcare, and we have a society that is ripe for continued authoritarian control because if we are destabilized, the majority will lurch for stability and the saviors will be those who claim to control the law, control law and order against so-called enemies of the state. Thank you.

I'm not telling you anything you don't know. I am rather nailing this to the historical record of our time in this sermon, and as a statement of resistance and a spiritual encouragement to you not to give in to the bold-faced tactics to have us lose our sense of connection and responsibility to one another. Our faith calls us, and I keep repeating this, our faith calls us to find more generosity to others. Not to lose faith in the idea that this world is the locus of the holy that struggle in salvation, are present here and now, and that all life is sacred and interconnected. And that only by generosity, a generosity of spirit that reigns in our hearts and in our communities will we be saved from this downward spiral.

And I'm not arguing against that. I just want to say to you that I know that you might be, that I certainly am at the limit of my ability to do this. I know what it means to break under despair and cynicism because I have been in the hope business for the last 12 years fighting uphill. I know that generosity can run thin, especially if it is given a thin label.

For many years in our faith, we have called a version of generosity tolerance. Tolerance has its limits, though. I think it's a weak virtue. It means that I will tolerate you no matter what you say or do. I think we are long past this. We almost also never have lived up to our own hope for tolerance, failing in many times our own injuries with things like Christianity and the church. David Rankin, a Unitarian minister, once told that he spoke at a Unitarian Church in Philadelphia. He chose Christian symbolism in literature as a topic. After the service, he was asked to attend a sermon discussion in the basement. Always a mistake to accept that idea. And he was greeted by an angry Unitarian man who shouted, "We have the freedom of the pulpit in this church and we don't want any of that Christian garbage around here!" "Like W.C. Fields," wrote Rankin, "I have never returned to Philadelphia."

My friend and colleague Bruce Cleary told this story and followed it saying, "Why is it that tolerance seems so much harder for us when it comes to Christian religions?" And he says, "Because Christianity is our parent, it gave us birth. After a very long childhood, we are now in our long teenage stage of rebellion. Creating a separate identity, which is healthy I suppose," he says. "Like any other teenager, learning separation, we have very little patience for our parent. That is why we find it easier to be more tolerant toward Rastafarians than toward Baptists."

This analogy, of course, can be taken far too literally, but the lesson is sound I think. It takes a certain maturity to be tolerant and it takes a certain security in one's identity to risk being tolerant. Being tolerant with regards to Christianity is recognizing and honoring the fact that Christianity is us. Similarly, I would say, part of being tolerant with regards to those we disagree with, wield abuse of power over society, even commit violence in the name of what they call freedom is recognizing and honoring the fact that they are part of us and we are part of them.

Which is the hardest thing to do right now. And it means we have to go beyond tolerance. We have to go beyond an allowance of difference to inclusiveness. That is why on the cover of your order of service it says, "We are genuinely inclusive." It is a goal post, it is a guide post for our spiritual lives. Genuine means it comes from the deepest part of who we are. The Latin *genuinus* means innate or natural. And inclusive is our ability to extend a deep welcome to another. Inclusion is integrating all people in groups and activity from the Latin *inclusio*, which means a shutting in. And this gets tricky in a shutting in when we do not shut out even when we want to. Even when every fiber of our body says, "Shut this person out." Even when our fear wants to separate from those we dislike or disregard.

To which I say the difference in an overly optimistic or naïve progressive internal position and tolerance with genuine inclusion that is instead of just accepting everyone for who they are. Our spiritual work is to hear each person we meet and each person we hear into speech, yet not letting them damage us or damage the communities we built. And that is the point at which genuine inclusivity matters. Here in this genuinely inclusive place, we build with a generous spirit because we will give everyone a chance, but it does not mean that we will let hateful, damaging things happen to us or our community. It means that this firm, yet supple spiritual position of generosity of spirit can only happen if we cultivate a generosity that does not bend to breaking from our own fear, and our own rage and our own hatred. We must practice generosity, but we cannot let the family of our society be destroyed by hatred, and fear and violence, especially our own.

I know this is hard spiritual work, it is for me. The lessons on how to avoid this, we look to communities of color who have lived under the threat of annihilation for centuries in America. They understand the damaging forces of institutionalized systems of oppression that have been reinforced socially in our midst. They understand cis and hetero-normative ideas that create homophobias and transphobias. They understand imperialism that encourages colonialism. White supremacy that promotes white cultural values, norms and perspectives as superior and standard. They understand un-legislated capitalism that allows the exploitation of the working class, and ableism that creates prejudice against people against disabilities, and patriarchy that systematizes male power and privilege over everyone else.

All challenge a vulnerable society, challenge them not to break, to remain generous of spirit. All these things challenge us to uphold a moral code, to point to what is true and beautiful and good in the world. You don't have to be a person of color anymore to see how these forces are acting in our government, and in the policies, and in the behavior of those of our leaders. The president's mocking people with disabilities is not frivolous joking, it's ableism. The promises to lower the costs of living and doing nothing to address it while gaining personally is unfettered capitalism. The threats to invade and take over other countries is imperialism and colonialism. The attacks on trans people and the attacks on people of color is more of the same. All this has been deliberate to unseat our humanism. You get what I'm saying?

And communities of color have known these experiences for a long time. They have said that the only way to resist and to achieve liberation from these destructions in society is to combat them by creating liberating alternatives, communities of care and inclusion. Churches that do not give in. Art that points to the truth and does not flinch. Courageous people who walk in the streets and kneel in 40-minus-degree weather and are arrested for their faith. All this is in part why we have a director of equity initiatives now as he is grounded deeply in these values.

Values that come from Black and Indigenous people of color and others who have been saying over and over. Resist the dehumanization of others and yourself. Understand your and others' human resilience. Name what is real. Put your faith in building strength. Trust in something bigger than all of us, a God of many names that for us doesn't necessarily act on our behalf, but points to our power to co-create. And maybe most importantly, cultivate joy.

Joy cannot be underestimated in this time. It must be part of our spiritual disciplines. Because all generosity has at its core, a joy in life that understands that this world is the locus of the holy that struggle in salvation, are present here and now, and that all life is sacred and interconnected. Joy understands that we must open our eyes, and minds and hearts, and we must keep them open as we open up and we start to see beauty everywhere. Not only in nature, but in human nature.

In the poem that T.J. read today by the 14th Century Persian poet, he speaks to the essence of this generosity. He reminds us that generosity is not about material possessions, but that by offering our hearts and love to the world, we discover a profound sense of joy that can only be found in acts of selflessness. He says, "I was drenched in the garment of the beloved's tears." If you read that from our theology, that means the world's tears. "I'm drenched in the garments of the world's tears. I knew deep down though that there was no place that the sun never set, that love is eternal, and so I gathered my heart." No matter what happens on the TV, I gathered my heart and offered it to the world, for in giving I found myself, in generosity I found joy.

Parker Palmer says it another way. He says, "It requires no talent to look at the world and point out the things that numb us and depress us, but we must open our eyes, and minds and hearts, and we must keep them open."

Friends, what I'm saying to you is the spiritual food that can keep us alive. I know I am struggling just as much as you are with this. And I know that you know all this. Maybe I'm just trying to convince myself that it's true. Because I feel like I'm climbing a steep cultural hill here. One that keeps trying to convince us that pessimism and violence and bullies are our new gods. But maybe,

just maybe deep down, I know something else. That I can cultivate joy in generosity no matter what is happening in the world. That I can believe this. That I will not let them murder my hope on camera. That I will not give in or lose my sense of the miracle of what it means to be alive in this human experiment. That I will not let my despair in politics confuse me from my sorrow in humanity.

That, "I got a fast car, friends, and your arm around me feels really good right now. I had the feeling that I belonged. I had a feeling I could be someone, be someone, be someone," Tracy Chapman says. She's not talking about herself, she's talking about you.

I got a sense that I cannot let my heart be broken by the events of the day because in giving, I can find myself and in generosity, I can find joy. Won't you join me? Amen.